DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 139 065 EA 009 462

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TITLE The Political Dynamics of a School Tax Levy Versus a Public Transit Levy. Research Note.
PUB DATE 30 Mar 77
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, New York, April 4-8, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Attitudes; Conflict; Decision Making; Educational Finance; Educational Research; Elections; Local Issues; *Models; *Political Issues; Prediction; Public Facilities; *School Taxes; *Taxes; *Transportation; *Voting

ABSTRACT

An investigation of a proposed public transit was based on the assumptions that knowledge of school tax referenda should provide a framework for understanding voter behavior in other types of referenda, and that propositions generated in one type of research should hold up in another. It was anticipated that there would be spillover effects from past school referenda onto a proposed future transit referendum. In planning the survey instrument a strong similarity between a school levy and transit levy in the community was conceptualized. However, the data on public transit predicted a contested referendum but nothing even closely resembling a polarized electorate as had been anticipated. The mismatch of predispositions and the data suggested that a comparison was being made between two different political dynamics that were related to the question of high versus low saliency among an electorate that would temporarily assume the role of fiscal decision-maker. The difference in potential saliency of contested school versus transportation referenda is accounted for with a descriptive model of the dynamics of contested school fiscal referenda. (Author/MLF)

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Research Note

THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF A SCHOOL TAX LEVY VERSUS A PUBLIC TRANSIT LEVY

by

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Draft Copy

March 30, 1977

Prepared for delivery at the 1977 annual meeting of the American Educational Researchers Association, Politics of Education Special Interest Group, New York City, Columbia University Teacher's College, April 4, 1977.

EA 009 462

INTRODUCTION

Our investigation of a proposed public transit levy[1] was based upon the assumptions that knowledge of school tax referenda should provide a framework for understanding voter behavior in other types of referenda, and that propositions generated in one type of research should hold up in another. Also, there was a matter of convenience attached to those assumptions--we had some "knowledge" and "propositions" from school referenda studies in the catchment area of the transit service.[2] Those studies emphasized the interaction of a stable group of attitudinal syndromes in the community that explained what happened during referenda campaigns and elections.[3]

Our dependence upon insights from local school referenda also appeared to have situational face validity. It seemed logical to employ such insights to construct a survey instrument to probe the electorate for its affect toward a possible transit levy for reasons peculiar to this particular electorate. For one thing, the electorate was conditioned to register its mood regularly in the Athenian mode. The ritual of direct participation in fiscal decisionmaking had been acted out often in the school districts served by the transit authority. In addition, this electorate had "disappointed" the authorities on several occasions with unfavorable response to the authorities' proposals.[4] One outcome of such response has been the intensive referendum campaign.[5] Such campaigning, we theorized, is both cause and effect in polarizing the electorate and providing some stability to cleavages in this electorate that were referenda related and nonreferenda related.[6] We anticipated, therefore, that there would

be spillover effects from past school referenda onto a proposed future transit referendum. In planning our survey instrument, we conceptualized a strong similarity between a school levy and a transit levy in this community.

Imagine our surprise when the data on public transit predicted a contested referendum[7] but nothing even closely resembling a polarized electorate as we had anticipated. Our transit data do not yield the normal-for-school referenda wealth of interpretations that either predict voting patterns clearly or explain such patterns in dramatic and manageable stereotypes.

For example, in a school referendum in this community, alienation was a factor that supposedly divided the electorate sharply in terms of support or lack of support for the levy and/or the authorities. That electorate was surveyed a week after the referendum, and a general alienation scale produced the following results: of those "low" on this scale, (n=67) 79 percent voted pro levy, 21 percent anti; of those "high" on this scale, (n=75) 81 percent voted anti, 19 percent pro levy.[8]

In that same referendum survey, a scale designed to measure alienation specific to the election registered these impressive results: of those "low" on this scale, (n=55) 82 percent voted pro levy, 18 percent anti; of those "high" on this scale, (n=90) 92 percent voted anti, 8 percent voted pro levy.[9]

The degree of alienation in this school referendum, measured by two different scales, was highly predictive of school levy support or nonsupport. This, and other survey results from the school referendum, posited a clear picture of a divided and embattled community, a picture that was obvious to observers of this drama.

We used two of the items from the alienation scale specific to school referenda in the transit survey, but with altogether different results. Those items (C17 and C23 on the survey schedule) read as follows:

C17. If a levy is defeated, the so-called important people will just hold another election.

C23. When it comes to making up levies like this one, people like me are never consulted.

Of those who planned to support the transit levy, 60 percent (n=82) agreed with C17 and 73 percent (n=132) agreed with C23. Of those who planned not to support the levy, 64 percent (n=151) agreed with C17 and 71 percent (n=130) agreed with C23.

In sum, both supporters and nonsupporters of the transit levy responded similary and their response did not distinguish their voting intentions. Neither did that response suggest the more typical split of respondents in school levies: support for the levy equating with support for the authorities, nonsupport for the levy equating with nonsupport for the authorities.[10] The response to C17 and C23 in the context of a transit levy may or may not be interpreted as alienation; in the context of a contested school levy it was so interpreted and that interpretation seemed to fit not only the logic of the survey results but that of the real-life event.

We accept the unexpected response to items C17 and C23 as possible evidence that the transit issue may not polarize the electorate as recent school levies have in this community. The results from other survey items seemed to confirm that assessment. Consequently, we began to re-examine our data as if the political dynamics of a contested transit levy differed significantly from those of a contested school levy. From that point of view, one idea tended to crop up regularly in our discussions of the data: the proposed transit levy appeared to be less salient to the electorate than a school levy. This directed our attention toward the use of the data from the transit study to get a better comparative picture of saliency, as this might apply to school referenda when contrasted with transit referenda.

DETERMINANTS OF SALIENCY IN CONTESTED REFERENDA

We hypothesized five possible determinants of saliency that might contribute to the difference in the political dynamics of school versus transit referenda. These determinants are: (1) perception of the function as a public good that is critical for the life of the community; (2) large size and wide distribution of the constituency of the function; (3) high visibility of politics of an elected governing board; (4) perception of costs or benefits of the function as redistributive; and (5) self-perception of voters as "experts" on the issue. Those hypothesized determinants require further explication.

Perception of Function as Critical Public Good.

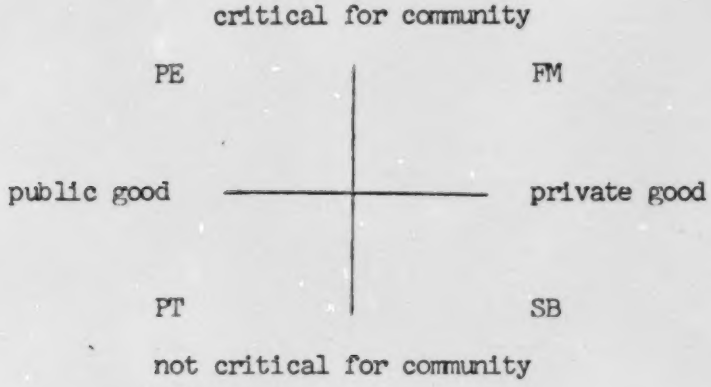
We conceptualized this determinant as the combination of two possible scales that could be crossed. (See: Figure 1.) Our assumption was that a function that was salient for collective action like referenda would be perceived by the electorate as "clearly" a public good[11] and "highly" critical for the life of the community. In such a schema, formal education, especially K-12, would be considered salient. This appears to be one reason why contested referenda are events that can trigger community conflict.[12]

Where does public transportation fit in the schema of saliency that we have just postulated? In the medium size community that we surveyed, one could guess at an answer to that question based upon the disappearance of a complex street car system and a complementary commuter railroad, and the near demise of a bus system that was utilized close to capacity until the latter part of the 1950s.

The survey data, however, provide some interesting footnotes to that picture. For one thing, 57 percent of the survey sample (n=457) responded that it was "very important" to have a good bus system serving that community; 28 percent

Fig. 1

Classifying Perceptions of Services in a Community



Examples: PE--public education K-12; FM--availability of fresh milk; SB--selling of skate boards; PT--public transportation

(n=222) said it was "not very important;" while 12 percent (n=95) said it was "not important at all." Those data suggest that approximately 40 percent of the sample do not consider public transit to be a critical community need.

How might that question fare if the issue were a school system instead? The fact that it is never or rarely ever asked in survey research projects two possibilities: it is not viewed as a survey item that would discriminate among respondents, because most would probably respond "very important;" or (2) academicians usually prepare survey schedules and would never think that the function with which they are associated is not perceived as "very important." In any event, that item did discriminate among potential transit referendum voters. (See: Table 1.) It might even have been something of a surrogate of voting intentions.

Table 1

Voting Intentions on a Proposed Public Transit Levy and Perception of Importance of Bus System

Voting Intention	Degree of Importance: % very	% not very	% not at all	% unsure
for	84	13	02	01
unsure	68	29	04	00
against	36	39	21	05
(N)	(455)	(220)	(93)	(24)

X^2=302.772 with 6 dg.f. ($p < .001$)

How about the perception of public transportation as a public good? Response to the following pair of items seems to be instructive:

C27. A bus system is not like a private business and shouldn't be run just to make a profit.

C20. People who don't ride the buses shouldn't have to pay the tax.

In the survey sample, 57 percent of the respondents agreed with item C27. There is a majority perception, then, that this is a public good. Among those who disagree, the difference between referendum voters is not too significant: 39 percent of the non-supporters disagree to 35 percent of the supporters. There is, perhaps, some feeling in the electorate that this service ought to be run profitably or at least, not at the "loss" that it currently shows each year.[13] That possible perception, or something akin to it, is more common among non-supporters of the levy, but not significantly. It is when the perception is tied to the tax, as in C20, that this becomes a more discriminating measure between levy supporters and nonsupporters. (See Table 2.)

Table 2 does discriminate among the electorate when it comes to voting intentions. And the data of that table show a significant minority among the electorate (25 percent) who believe that non-riders should not have to pay for riders. However, the discriminating nature of this survey item calls more attention to the response than is warranted. It is easy to overlook the response to C27, which does not discriminate relative to voting intent but does project a larger minority who do prefer a bus system that is run like a business for profit. A total of 37.4 percent of the survey sample do not see public transportation as a public good and that perception is not tied closely to straining for consistency relative to voting intentions.

Table 2

Voting Intentions on a Proposed Transit Levy and Attitudes Toward Non-Riders Being Taxed for Public Transit

	Don't Tax Non-Riders		
Voting Intention	% Agree	% Unsure	% Disagree
for	12	03	85
unsure	09	33	58
against	41	08	50
(N)	(100)	(31)	(263)

$X^2=84.352$ with 4 dg.f. ($p < .001$)

We believe that there is not agreement among this electorate that public transportation is critical for the survival of this community or that such transportation is clearly a public good. There is a point of view, supported by the data, that riders should pay a lion's share of transit costs. This is quite unrealistic, of course, and tends to contradict the very notion of public transportation as a public good.

By contrast, the battle over funding public education is not over whether or not to subsidize this function or whether to tie costs to benefits directly, e.g., payment for services to the number of users in any given family. The battle in public education is over how much to spend and how to get taxpayers to foot the bill. In the evolving concept of saliency that we are proposing, public education is viewed as generally much more salient to voters than public transportation. And though both issues raise the question of redistributive policy, in public education we are addressing a function that is accepted as more critical to survival and more legitimate for collective action.

Size and Distribution of Constituency.

The contrast of potential saliency between public education and public transportation in terms of this determinant requires little in the way of documentation. For one thing, the almost-empty buses that travel the community regularly are testimony to a dwindling constituency for this public function. Compare that highly visible image to the equally visible hubbub of human activity in areas adjacent to public schools, that is related to the large constituency for this function. It is not only a large constituency but one that is, by design, apportioned equally (or close to this) throughout the community.[14] Studies of contested school referenda usually project a base constituency of no less than one-third of the total electorate as parents of children in school. That does not even begin to measure saliency in terms of grandparents and other relatives of children in school, and, of course, those in the community who are part of the school establishment or earn their livelihood, all or part, through their connections to the schools. When referenda studies try to tap the "turnout theme," the effective electorate--those who vote regularly--

provides an even more potentially imposing constituency for this function. (We are not predicting the vote one way or the other based on this constituency, but suggesting, instead, the constituency as one basis for the high saliency of public education.[15])

The data of the transit referendum survey substantiate the relatively small constituency for public transportation in this community and its generally concentrated location. In the survey sample, 84 percent of the respondents (n=664) never ride public transportation, and 10 percent (n=76) ride the buses less than once a month. Our sample reflected only 3 percent (n=23) who use public transit at least once a week. Further, there is evidence from this survey that ridership is concentrated within the city limits, with very little in the outlying communities that are served by public transportation and where there the residents are potential voters on a transit levy. The demographic variables of bus riders also suggest that they are more likely to be center-city residents: blacks, renters, and voters under 30 years of age.[16]

Table 3

Voting Intentions on a Proposed Transit Levy and Perceptions That the Levy is Too Much to Ask Voters Now

	Levy Now Too Much to Ask Voters		
Voting Intention	% Agree	% Unsure	% Disagree
for	57	04	30
unsure	83	00	17
against	91	03	06
(N)	(312)	(11)	(72)

X^2=66.761 with 4 dg.f. ($p < .001$)

On the basis of constituency, interest, then, public transportation is not as potentially salient to voters as public education. That possibility may have influenced the results that show up in Table 3.

The question of money--i.e., who pays--discriminates sharply among levy supporters and nonsupporters in Table 3. That should not come as a surprise. That is, certainly, one thing that fiscal referenda "are all about." Consequently, the nonsupporters, as per Table 3, "logically" take the opportunity to tell us that the millage is too much to ask of voters (most of whom are nonriders). Economic man speaks--with a message that is widely understood.[17]

But what about the levy supporters? They are, if nothing else, "getting the message." In this referendum, they seem to be sympathizing with an electorate that may have to come up with the added tax burden of 2 mills. They have made the choice for themselves, but they recognize, too, the logic of the opposite choice, even in a contested public transit referendum. That is atypical of contested school fiscal referenda where the electorate divides itself into "us" against "them," so that perceptions are so selectively sorted out that potential voters have no trouble "negotiating the facts" according to which perceptually armed camp they eventually choose. We are proposing that this "choosing" is related very closely to the question of saliency. Working backwards from that proposition, we theorize that the large constituency, widely dispersed, contributes to the greater saliency of public education as opposed to the lesser potential saliency of public transportation. That lesser saliency has even permitted levy supporters the almost unheard of luxury of agreeing (57 percent of them) with the statement that this levy is too much to ask of the voters.[18]

Visible Politics of an Elected Governing Board.

This determinant of saliency is reflected only impressionistically from our data of the transit survey. An example of our speculative thinking in this area is our analysis of response to the following item of the survey schedule:

C15. It is the duty of voters to pass an operating tax for the bus system.

Table 4 looks very much like a table that would be generated by a contested school tax election. Supporters signal their vote with a positive response, nonsupporters with a negative response to a degree that is significant, statistically and situationally. (See: Table 4.)

Table 4

Voting Intentions on a Public Transit Levy and Perception of Voters' Responsibility to Pass This Levy

Voting Intention	Duty of Voters: Pass Levy		
	% agree	% unsure	% disagree
for	62	07	32
unsure	32	23	46
against	21	09	70
(N)	(141)	(35)	(219)

$X^2=69.112$ with 4 d.g.f. ($p < .001$)

The data of Table 4 could be interpreted as one piece of evidence of a potentially polarized electorate. But that image does not square with the data thus far presented, nor the "gestalt" of this survey. In the same community, in a school tax referendum this measure was part of a scale that

helped the researchers conceptualize the mental predisposition to be a "good citizen." That predisposition included, among other perceptions, supporting the duly constituted school authorities and rejecting the mass of voters who could not be trusted with decisionmaking that required personal sacrifice.[19] The items used in scaling in the school referenda did not produce scales for the proposed transit referendum, although some individual items did discriminate voting intent, as in Table 4.

Our interpretation of Table 4 is speculative and somewhat circuitous but it makes sense if one can manage the question of saliency and the feeling one gets while working with the data of the survey as a "whole." In the school referenda research, the not-so-hidden agenda was that the attitudes were, in fact, the events.[20] The attitudes were akin to an independent variable; "they" were stable scripts, so to speak, that foreshadowed the drama to be. That possibility, however, is hinged upon the assumption that the issue would be salient, that there would be a large enough (a critical mass) audience that would become involved in the drama.[21]

In the light of low saliency, Table 4 can be viewed as a potential electorate straining for consistency without the clues of "us" against "them" or the companion perception from the point of view of nonsupporters: taxpayers versus the establishment.

What is the establishment of publicly subsidized transportation? Who are the transit board? How do they come into existence? Contrast that "invisibility" with the highly visible politics of school board elections. Those elections, in this community, have been salient. There have been board election issues that have catalyzed community cleavages: in the recent past a running battle against the upper class waspish character of the Board,[22] more recently the question of racial composition.[23]

A transit election does not tend to polarize, which leaves a gray area that does not help people express or work out their basic problems of political authority. When they say "It is the duty of the voter..." they are not expressing support for authority, but a generalized positive orientation to "the public good."[24]

The unique characteristics of school levy referenda--the high saliency, emotional tone and intensity, and polarization--are a spillover, to some degree, from the electoral politics of school boards.[25] This seems to be a dynamic that is missing from the politics of many other public service areas, where the connection between representational politics and referendum politics is much less direct or missing. There is usually no elected board directly responsible for such functions as mental health, social welfare, and, in this instance, mass transit. By contrast, the patterns of alliance and cleavage established for the purpose of winning seats on the board of education tend to be maintained and to color behavior on school referenda. The pattern may be reinforced over a period of time, as feelings generated by a series of levy elections (especially if closely contested) feed back into the representational election process.

That picture of the potential of representational politics as one determinant of saliency for school referenda may seem over-accentuated. However, representational politics in combination with other determinants of saliency can produce a reinforcing set of connected variables. This, in turn, can make school levy elections occasions for the expression of deeply held core beliefs about life and politics, especially for the alienated voter.[26]

The Perception of Costs/Benefits as Redistributive

Public education policy and public transportation policy are patently redistributive in allocating costs and assigning benefits. Consequently, both functions are potentially salient for community members, particularly those who see themselves as disadvantaged compared to others in the relationship of costs and benefits. Public education is, of course, a bigger ticket item than public transportation, so that subjectively-computed disadvantages in a cost/benefit calculus are considerable, and saliency is, therefore, literally guaranteed.

On a smaller scale, a calculus for public transportation may be computed by those who pay additional millage to subsidize this function. However, this may be muted somewhat by the comparatively low millage at stake and the picture of riders paying a fare whenever they use the service. (That fare, by the way, may be computed subjectively as "high" by some car owners faced with the choice of using their own vehicle or the public's.)

Data from the transit survey do project that respondents recognize the economic basis of a referendum and interpret those economics in the redistributive frame of reference. For example, 78 percent of the respondents agreed with the following item and only 19 percent disagreed:

> C13. People who don't use the buses will probably vote against the bus levy.

Item C13 did distinguish levy supporters from nonsupporters, 74 percent of the former agreeing with this item compared to 86 percent of the latter. But the important point is that, overwhelmingly, both supporters and nonsupporters expected voters to maximize their private utilities. The picture of the voter in a transit referendum as an "economic/rational man" seems to pervade our survey results, with levy supporters and nonsupporters generally agreeing on that picture, differing mostly in degree when it comes to this, not kind.

Now comes the large leap of faith, informed, we hope by our assessment of the data, not our disposition to believe.[27] We think that, without a high powered referendum campaign that "stirs things up," the redistributive nature of transit referenda is not a strong determinant of saliency.[28] For example, declared levy nonsupporters responded positively in endorsing (via the survey) as important: reducing fares, adding more routes in suburban areas, and adding bus service on Saturdays. They do not stand to benefit directly from such measures, but they can accept them as "important." Certainly, lowering the fares does not solve the problem of redistributive policy for a non-user who plans to vote against the issue. Perhaps, there is no easily discernible logic to much of the survey response, but there is a pattern that can be managed when it is placed beside the more typical pattern of surveys of contested school referenda. We refer to nonsupporters in this transit referendum who have not used every survey item available to take the "opposite side" (real or imagined) that the authorities would probably take. To illustrate that this may be "for real," not just yeasaying, we have prepared Table 5.

Table 5

Voting Intentions on a Public Transit Levy and Perception of Adding More Buses as a Waste of Taxpayers' Money

	More Buses Waste Taxes		
Voting Intention	% agree	% unsure	% disagree
for	14	19	76
unsure	27	32	41
against	48	18	34
(N)	(122)	(60)	(213)

$X^2=78.933$ with 4 d.f. ($p<.001$)

Table 5, obviously, separates levy supporters from nonsupporters on response to the following item:

C21. Expanding the current bus service is probably a waste of the taxpayers' money.

This sharp break between perceptions of those planning to vote "yes" and those planning to vote "no," as we have already shown, seems to take place more dramatically when the subject of costs comes up, not benefits.[29]

Table 5 may help us to understand levy supporters as a group of voters who would be acting irrationally according to the "economic man" thesis.[30] That thesis, obviously, cannot account for all referendum behavior.[31] Certainly, for levy supporters the redistributive nature of mass transit is not a deterrent to their endorsement of this as a public good. According to Table 5, their endorsement is not only for the transportation system as it is, (the current bus service) but for one that is expanded in its services. That possibility applies to more than just levy supporters. When the total survey sample is tallied up, 54 percent of the respondents do not consider the expansion of this function "a waste of the taxpayer's money."

The redistributive nature of a transit referendum makes it salient to some members of the electorate for that reason. For those who support such a referendum redistributive policy is not a deterrent to support but, more likely, part of the definition of this function as a public good. Because of low millage, for one thing, redistributive policy may not raise saliency for transit referenda to an exceptionally high level. There is another possible factor at work. That is the final determinant of saliency: how voters compare what they think they know about the function in question to what they think they ought to know in order to make an "educated" decision.

Self-Perception of Voters as "Experts"

Both public education and public transportation are domains where many professionals control significant areas of decisionmaking on the basis of their expertise.[32] There is evidence that a large number of these professionals-as-experts prefer decisionmaking based upon "technical grounds" as opposed to what they define as "political grounds."[33] Contested referenda can be classed in the latter category of decisionmaking. There is something of a role reversal here, in that voters have to be educated to be "more expert"--i.e., to buy the package prepared by the professionals. But to do this, sometimes the professionals-as-experts have to become "politicians."[34]

How might the role of voters-as-experts translate into saliency in school versus transportation referenda? We guess that most voters facing a school fiscal referendum view themselves as expert enough to handle this decision. It is not an unstructured situation for them, especially in a contested referendum.[35] The "contest" generates much information (propaganda?) via the campaign. That reinforces the predisposition of levy supporters to vote "yes." It also has the function of revealing school politics as a one-party system to levy nonsupporters, and consequently sometimes shores up their perception of an establishment that is "trying to put something over on them." The opposition party "organizes" without being organized. In these circumstances, it is not difficult for many voters to make up their minds. Situationally, if nothing else, they are experts. That scenario may be strengthened by at least three other possibilities: (1) voters <u>are</u> generally familiar with schools, school issues and school-related problems because this is reported widely in the media exclusive of episodic referenda campaigns; (2) voters, typically, are products of the school systems they are asked to fund and consequently have "feelings" about their experiences; and (3) the cost of voting

"yes" or "no" is high enough that this is an incentive to go out and get the information that the voter needs (sometimes more subjectively than objectively).

Our data from the transit survey do not match the above picture very closely. The transit voter does not perceive himself/herself as an "expert." Item C19 reads: "Voting on a bus levy is a tough decision to make" and 68 percent of the survey sample agreed.[36] Those figures broke down as follows: of levy supporters, 65 percent agreed, of nonsupporters 70 percent agreed. The latter category even topped respondents who were unsure of their voting intentions--among this group, 68 percent agreed. That is not a picture of an electorate that is ready to become the "experts" on this issue.[37]

What is missing from the situation (exclusive of a polarized electorate and an intensive campaign in whichever order you prefer)? According to the response to item C16--"information." Item C16 reads: "More people would vote for tax levies if things were explained better." In a school referendum that item distinguished sharply between levy supporters and nonsupporters. The former said "no, absolutely not." Those supporters saw that as: (1) a rationalization for selfish voting and (2) a slur directed at the authorities who made more information available than could be assimilated.[38] The nonsupporters said "yes," they wanted more information (and perhaps less propaganda) because the authorities were not "telling all" or all "like it is."

We were not prepared for the transit survey response to item C16. Both supporters and nonsupporters agreed by large majorities that the electorate needed more information. (See: Table 6.) But it was the levy supporters who saw the need in greater numbers and by a much larger percent than nonsupporters.

That difference is statistically significant; but more important, the data for all groups do not project an assembly of legislators that is confident about carrying out its assignment.

Table 6

Voting Intentions in a Transit Levy and the Perception That Voters Would Vote Favorably with More Information

	More Info: More Favorable to Levy		
Voting Intention	% agree	% unsure	% disagree
for	93	02	05
unsure	85	09	06
against	72	04	24
(N)	(329)	(13)	(54)

$X^2=34.706$ with 4 d.f. ($p < .001$)

A transit referendum may not be salient to potential voters, then, because these voters do not feel expert enough to feel intensely about the issues that are bundled up in the referendum package. Obviously, that can be turned around the other way: voters may not feel intensely about public transportation, one way or the other, certainly not intensely enough to become "experts." The "intensity problem" in decisionmaking, especially voting, has been raised by numerous political scientists. How that problem "works out" often contributes to the shape of an electorate in terms of turnout and voting intentions. We had no measures that tested intensity adequately. Inferentially, however, we think that the data project an electorate for the transit referendum that does not have a well-defined shape. Counting votes in a survey such as this may provide a picture that does not take into account the factor of intensity. That is, in part, because saliency is low for potential voters in this referendum. It

is very tempting to speculate that this low saliency is a typical concomitant of public transit levies, partly because much of the electorate views the issue as more technical than political. But then the politics are hidden by an appointed board. And there is not the familiarity with this service that is more likely when a large constituency, widely distributed uses the service. The determinants of saliency do interrelate. That was where we planned to be at this point in our narrative.

THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF CONTESTED SCHOOL FISCAL REFERENDA

We are ready to propose a descriptive model of the dynamics of contested school fiscal referenda. Our willingness to do so is a byproduct of our investigation of a proposed public transit levy. In that investigation we used our knowledge of school fiscal referenda in the community under study to prepare the investigatory instrument. More than that, we were informed by a framework and some propositions from school referenda in the search for "meaning" in the data from the transit referendum. The mismatch of our predispositions and those data, as we interpreted this, suggested that we were trying to compare two different political dynamics that were related to the question of high versus low saliency among an electorate that would temporarily assume the role of fiscal decisionmaker. We have attempted to account for the difference in potential saliency of contested school versus transportation referenda. That exercise directed our attention to modeling the political dynamics of contested school fiscal referenda.[39]

Figure 2 is our way of connecting the determinants of saliency that we have posited with outcomes that we have observed in contested school referenda. The model that Figure 2 maps out offers some clues about the possible structure of community conflict catalyzed by a contested referendum.

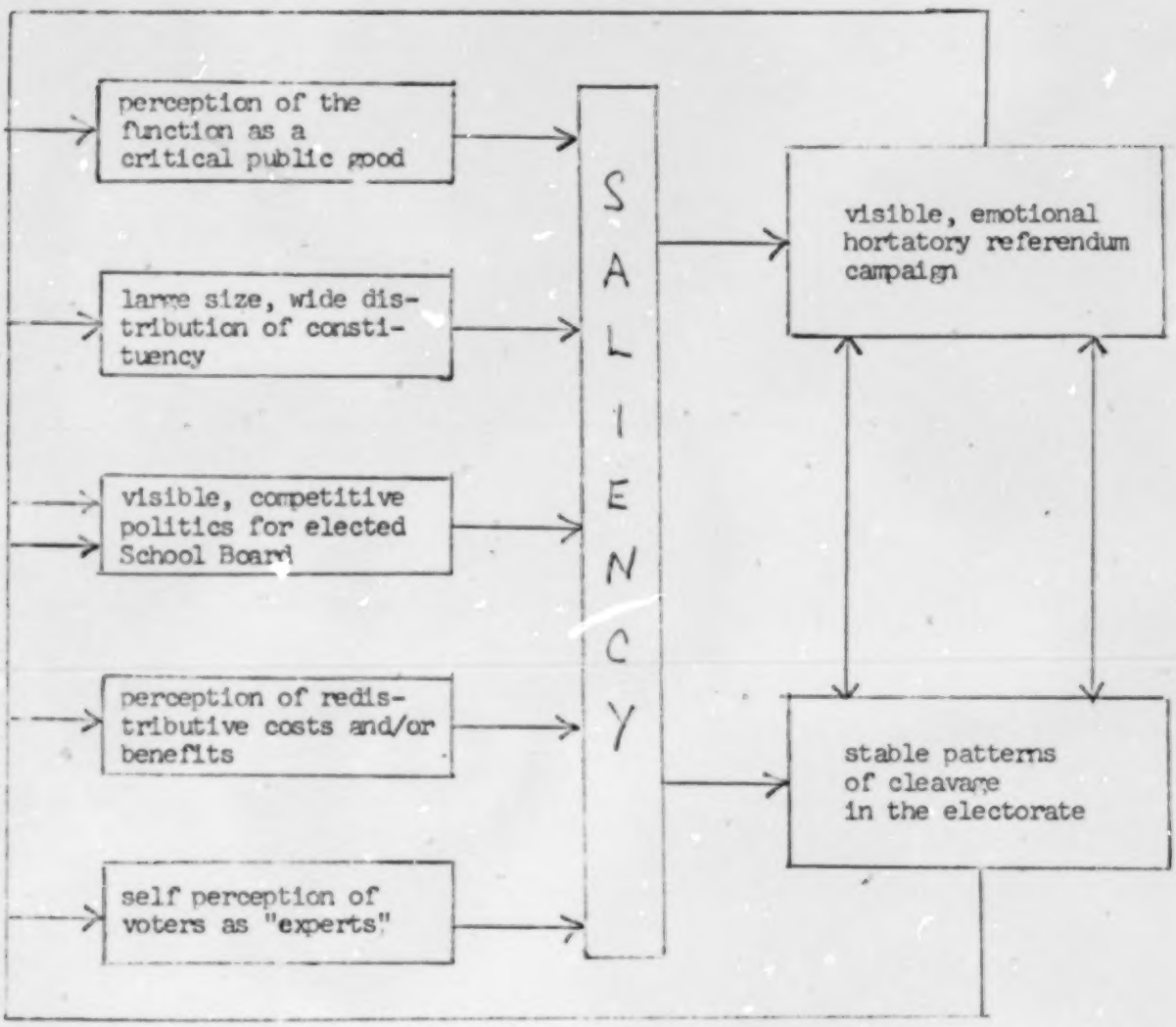
We believe that our model complements some of the insights of Coleman's research on community conflict. That researcher posits community conflict as an outcome of events that meet the following criteria: The event must touch upon an important aspect of the lives of community members; it must affect the lives of different community members differently; and it must be structured so that community members can do something about it.[40] The application of those criteria to contested school referenda is obvious, including the third criterion, voting one way or the other on the issue.

We believe that we have added to the Coleman theory of community conflict as this theory applies specifically to school referenda. The saliency that Coleman postulates in his first criterion we explain as the function of five determinants (one of which is his second criterion): (1) perception of this function as a public good that is critical for the life of the community; (2) large size and wide distribution of the constituency of this function; (3) high visibility of politics of an elected School Board; (4) perception of costs and/or benefits of this function as redistributive; and (5) self-perception of voters that they are "experts" on this issue. The resultant saliency is a factor in visible, emotional, hortatory campaigns because the school establishment cannot risk ignoring the high saliency of the large bundle of issues that are packaged--willingly and unwillingly from the schoolmen's point of view--in a fiscal referendum. There is too much at stake to leave to chance the confluence of this saliency and the possibility of negative referendum voting.

Figure 2 also hypothesizes that the high saliency of contested referenda in a community leads to some stable cleavages in the electorate that are related to the issue at stake and some equally stable cleavages that are not

Figure 2

A Model of the Political Dynamics of
Contested School Fiscal Referenda


perception of the function as a critical public good
large size, wide distribution of constituency
visible, competitive politics for elected School Board
perception of redistributive costs and/or benefits
self perception of voters as "experts"
SALIENCY
visible, emotional hortatory referendum campaign
stable patterns of cleavage in the electorate
a self reinforcing pattern of behavior

related directly to a specific referendum. Those cleavages can be cumulative and mutually reinforcing. That possibility increases the risk that the contest might go against the authorities. Hence, the model purports to show a reciprocal pattern between the escalation of the campaign and the exacerbation of both kinds of cleavages that we have hypothesized (analytically more so than empirically). That process feeds back into the concept of saliency that we have proposed. The result may be unintended community conflict.

We have speculated that electoral politics hold a special place among the determinants of saliency for communities where contested School Board elections are the norm, not the exception. When the politics of Board elections approximate a two-party or multi-party system, it appears to be evidence that the traditional consensual system of "nonpolitical" elite ownership of this symbol of community status and power is up for grabs. The struggle that ensues, we guess, is not only a determinant of saliency but it is an independent variable that contributes to the tone of referenda campaigns directly and the ability of the electorate to sharpen its understanding of its "cleavaged" nature.

Those who endorse the pluralist version of American politics have commented favorably on the numerous points of access for interests in our system. Figure 2 may illustrate, only too well for school authorities, the truth of that observation, but certainly not its wisdom. Competitive School Board politics are relatively new to most communities. They may forecast more controversy ahead, especially over school fiscal decisionmaking via the referendum route. Our model is not intended to be predictive; however, the electoral politics of the governing board, in this instance, is a relatively new phenomenon

and worthy of extra attention. We are, admittedly, guessing at its potential "saliency" and correlatively about its possible "saliency" for further research by those rare ones in the political science guild who are fascinated with and impressed with the importance of the politics of public education.[41]

CONCLUSION

Our conclusions are brief, tentative, and paradoxical. Our model may be heuristic even more than it is descriptive in the sense that it raises questions about contested referenda that mirror some of the enduring questions of politics.

For example, it strikes us as something of a paradox that when the projected political dynamics of school referenda are compared to those of transportation referenda the question of what to do about "information" becomes problematical and beset with contradictions. The electorate in the contested school referendum does not want more information. In a community where contested referenda are the norms such information may be superfluous for one side of the issue and inflammatory for the other. Indeed, the "proof" of selective perception of facts, not only values, is a concomitant of most conflictive referenda and researchers multiply the number of tables already available that substantiate this phenomenon. In a transportation referendum, however, the electorate wants more information to become more expert in disposing with this issue. But the authorities fear the outcome of providing information and its corresponding campaign in anticipation of the dreaded possibility of turning a technical question into a political one.

There is the related concern of whether the campaign in referenda should be organized or not, or be organized but appear to be spontaneous. An organized campaign inevitably reveals an establishment in charge, no matter how

well it is orchestrated to disguise the one-party politics that it represents. Technical elites are thereby revealed for what they may also be--i.e., political elites. In addition, invisible elites may become visible and correspondingly more vulnerable to some parts of the electorate that are not only anti-establishment, but ready, willing, and able to project other discontent upon this most convenient target.

Then there is the question of the schizophrenic--or so it seems--problem of grafting Athenian politics on a system that is used to and prefers the Madisonian variety. But the rhetoric of direct participation is powerful and does appeal to some needs that are genuine among the electorate as well as some expectations that are widely shared. Thus, we have the problem: the democratic wisdom in the form of competitive politics in the electoral reality of School Boards can have unintended consequences for fiscal policy-making for the public good, education. And as that Board becomes more representative of the "people" it serves, it moves farther from the politics of consensus and closer to the politics of conflict.

"Conflict" has been posed by numerous academicians from disparate disciplines as instructive. Our model of contested school referenda posits a politics, then with the capability "to instruct." As an outside possibility, perhaps the model itself may, in a small way, also "instruct."

End Notes

[1]See: Steve Redburn, "Mass Transit as a Public Good," Center for Urban Studies, Youngstown State University, (mimeographed report Feb., 1977) for complete survey methodology, data, and findings. The survey sample was 800 residents of the transit catchment area. The questionnaire consisted of 36 items, 15 of which were rotated, reducing the length of each version to 28 items. The aegis of the survey was applied research for the transit authority to try to discover the shape of the electorate and the kind of a campaign that would appeal to this electorate. None of the tables or analysis presented in this Research Note appears in the report to the transit authority.

[2]See: Sylvan H. Cohen and Richard W. Taylor, "An Experimental Study of the Public Mind: An Application of Q Methodology to a Local Referendum Situation," Experimental Study of Politics 1 (July 1971), pp. 82-117; Sylvan H. Cohen, "Voting Behavior in School Referenda: An Investigation of Attitudes and Other Determinants by Q Technique and Survey Research" (unpublished dissertation, Kent State University, 1971); Howard D. Hamilton and Sylvan H. Cohen, Policy Making by Plebiscite: School Referenda (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1974).

[3]Hamilton and Cohen, op. cit., especially pp. 238-239. The influence of Wm Stephenson, The Play Theory of Mass Communication (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1967) is acknowledged for the conclusion that the subjective attitudes of the participants were the events.

[4]There are six independent school districts in the transit service area. All of those districts have had contested school fiscal referenda. See: Hamilton and Cohen, op. cit., pp. 164-171 for case studies of a series of conflictive referenda in three of those school districts that are each coterminous with local governmental jurisdictions.

[5]See: Hamilton and Cohen, op. cit., pp. 165-166 for an exception to that "principle" in this community, when the school authorities resorted to the sleeper strategy: no media publicity, no billboards, and no literature. That was the worst defeat in a well-publicized series of referendum losses.

[6]The community in question is an industrial one of medium size with a large ethnic population and a substantial black minority. Race, ethnicity, religion, and union affiliation are correlates of referenda voting in this community as well as bases for cleavage on other issues. See: Cohen, op. cit., pp. 177-205.

[7]We conceive of contested referenda as those in which the vote is "close," i.e., an election where the results are in the 49-54 percent range. That measure was borrowed from: Frederick M. Wirt and Michael W. Kirst, The Political Web of American Schools (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 108.

[8]Cohen, op. cit., pp. 212-123 for tabular presentation of those data; pp. 132-137 for the tiems of the scales and their construction.

[9]Ibid., pp. 217-219.

[10]See: Hamilton and Cohen, op. cit., pp. 225-235 for a more complete explanation of this phenomenon derived from small sample, intensive research, and pp. 235-239 for corroborating evidence from survey research.

[11]One important aspect of pure public goods, as some political economists view this, is that once they are created for some citizens, they are available to others without reference to who pays the costs. See: Vincent Ostrom, The Intellectual Crisis in Public Administration (Tuscaloosa: U. of Alabama Press, 1974), pp. 50-58 for an abbreviated explanation of public goods in the context of public choice theory.

[12]James S. Coleman, Community Conflict (New York: Free Press, 1957), p. 4 in which the author cites education as an example of one criterion of community conflict, an event that touches upon an important aspect of community members' lives.

[13]See: Dennis La Rue, "WRTA Will Borrow $200,000" Youngstown Vindicator (March 27, 1977) p.1 for evidence of the financial problems the authority faces that have been publicized regularly in the local media.

[14]See: Francis E. Rourke, Bureaucracy, Politics, and Public Policy, 2nd ed'n. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), pp. 85-90 for a related discussion of the importance of size and distribution of an agency's constituency for guaging differentials in "agency power."

[15]See: Hamilton and Cohen, op. cit., pp. 72-81 for theories about the relationship of turnout and referenda outcomes. For an update on this, see: John Stuart Hall, "On Public Finance in a Democracy: Some Causes and Consequences of Variations in Participation in School Budget Election," (a paper prepared for the annual meeting of the American Educational Researchers Ass'n., New York City, April 1977).

[16]Redburn, op. cit., p. 18.

[17]Hamilton and Cohen, op. cit., pp. 256-260, the economic model of referenda voting.

[18]Cohen, op. cit., pp. 154-155 for tables that show school levy supporters and nonsupporters as completely "opposite" in their perception of taxes as "too much to ask of the voters."

[19]Ibid., pp. 97-116. For a similar attitudinal syndrome, here referred to as "community conservationists," see: Robert E. Agger and Marshall N. Goldstein, Who Will Rule the Schools: A Cultural Class Crisis (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1971).

[20]Cohen, op. cit., pp. 255-257 calls to account the weakness of that point of view in his own research. There is a tendency to "go overboard" with this assumption and to, correlatively, slight the situational context and the equally plausible explanation that the "situation" is the independent variable with attitudes the dependent variable. Perhaps that explanation makes them something less than "attitudes" and, therefore, has to be rejected by way of the definitional process.

[21]See: E. E. Schattschneider, The Semi-Sovereign People (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 1-19 and 62-77 on the battle over the audience in political conflict and the importance of the audience for the outcome.

[22]Clingan Jackson, "Confidence is Key to School Levy" Youngstown Vindicator (Jan. 26, 1969), pp. 1 and 4. The crisis of confidence described here is an "unrepresentative" Board of "old-stock Youngstowners."

[23]One of the authors of this Research Note has prepared precinct-level maps of voting patterns in the 1975 school board elections that show a basic race-related cleavage. Predominantly black neighborhoods supported black candidates. Most predominantly white areas supported the successful white candidates. Virtually the same geographic pattern was present seven months later in voting on a school levy renewal.

[24]The supposition here is that such voting is not the same pattern of response associated with the "good citizen" (Hamilton and Cohen, op. cit.) or the "community conservationist" (Agger and Goldstein, op. cit.).

[25]According to a recent study by the National School Boards Association, 95 percent of the board members in the U.S. are elected. See: "Who's on the School Board," Today's Education (March-April, 1977), p. 8.

[26]The "alienated voter" is a popular theme in academic and journalistic literature of referenda. See: Cohen, op. cit., pp. 21-41 for a discussion of this theme and a series of case studies of referenda in which this phenomenon was reported as "dominant."

[27]We could not resist the opportunity of reminding ourselves of Santayana's warning: "The empiricist thinks he believes only what he sees—but he is better at believing than seeing."

[28]Dennis La Rue, "Low-Key Levy Drive Set," Youngstown Vindicator, Feb. 27, 1977, p. 2 describes the authority's plans for a "low-key" campaign for a two mill levy that will be voted on in a special election in June, 1977. The transit board chairman concurs in the "strategy" suggested by our data, advising the unseen and hopefully small audience: "There will be no high-pressure, Madison Avenue-type of campaign." See: Robert L. Bish and Robert Kirk, Economic Principles and Urban Problems (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974),

pp. 141-143 for a concise discussion of the problem of making "a public good" into a public good and how the benefits of that good can be sold and thus "subsidized."

[29]Further evidence that negative voting is not necessarily "alienated" voting but sometimes mostly "economic," e.g., see: Hamilton and Cohen, op. cit., pp. 211-212.

[30]That is, indeed, the operationalized definition of "public regardingness" proposed by James Q. Wilson and Edwin C. Banfield, "Public-Regardingness as a Value Premise in Voting Behavior," American Political Science Review 58 (Dec., 1964), pp. 876-887.

[31]Hamilton and Cohen, op. cit., pp. 247-260 for alternative models of voting behavior. One theme of this book, supported empirically wherever possible, is that referenda are complex events rarely subject to single-variable explanations for any of the many facets of these phenomena.

[32]See: Rourke, op. cit., pp. 72-77 on the relationship of expertise, politics, and power, and pp. 82-85 on varieties of bureaucratic expertise.

[33]See: Robert L. Lineberry and Ira Sharkansky, Urban Politics and Public Policy (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 110-113 on the "natural" tension between "professional management" and "political accountability."

[34]For a theoretical discussion of this role reversal, see: William A. Garrison, Power and Discontent (Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1968).

[35]We are indebted to Prof. Howard D. Hamilton who recognized very early that referenda did not need parties (in the conventional sense) and candidates (sometimes unconventional ones) to structure referenda and render them fit for study by a voting fraternity in search of cumulative voting theory. Prof. Hamilton directed the research and thinking that went into the dissertation Cohen op. cit. He is, however, absolved of any blame for faulty interpretations and the like associated with that venture.

[36]See: Cohen, op. cit., pp. 108-111 for analysis of a small group in the electorate that found a school referendum "a tough decision." These voters were labeled "ambivalent and cautious." For the other groups in the electorate this was an easy decision, one that seemed, suspiciously, to have been made well in advance of the referendum day.

[37]In all fairness, the reader should be reminded that the transit survey took place in the absence of a related "campaign." However, indictations point very clearly toward a consciously-designed "non-campaign" on this issue.

[38]See: Cohen, op. cit., 97-104.

[39]We have not gone to the extra effort, that seems to be superfluous, to model the dynamics of contested transportation referenda. Readers can draw that model almost as an "inverted" picture of Fig. 1, based upon our speculative discussion of the determinants of saliency.

[40] Coleman, op. cit., p. 4.

[41] One good starting point is: Robert Bendiner, The Politics of Schools: A Crisis in Self-Government (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) For a recent and imaginative piece of such research that inquires into the responsiveness of school boards see: Harvey J. Tucker and L. Harmon Zeigler "Responsiveness in Local Politics: A Comparative Analysis of School Boards" (a mimeographed paper delivered at AERA Teachers College Conference, April, 1977).